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ABSTRACT

Parental death or divorce can have serious effects on children. It is important for adults and teachers to provide support and to be available to listen to the child on an age appropriate level. This paper describes the emotional impact of loss on children both when a marriage is ending and when a parent is seriously ill or is recently deceased. The paper describes the five stages of grief experienced after divorce and death: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. The paper then describes the outward signs of grief in classrooms, which can include daydreaming, outbursts, declining grades, absenteeism, and incomplete work. The paper provides 20 suggestions for teachers to help ease the discomfort felt by these children, including being sensitive to the child and his lack of a parent, being supportive of the parent's situation, maintaining good communication between the child and parent(s), and maintaining a child's privacy. The paper describes a resource program called RAINBOWS that provides grief support to children and adolescents in their effort to cope with loss. It also describes two curricula programs for elementary aged children and adolescents. The paper contains two appendices listing age level reactions to death and age level reactions to divorce. (SD)

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When Death or Divorce Occur

HELPING CHILDREN COPE WITH LOSS

by Suzy Yehl Marta

We perceive childhood as a time of innocence and magic; for many children, however, youth is a time of loss. Every 30 seconds a child's parents divorce. One of every six children will lose a parent to death before age 15. I have been in classrooms where 50 percent of the children have lost a parent to either death or divorce. As adults, we experience overwhelming emotional pain from the loss of a loved one. For children, losing a parent through divorce or death can be even more traumatic.

Children view their parents as a rock-solid institution with the sole purpose of serving and protecting them. Consequently, when one parent dies or both parents divorce, the child's entire world crashes in. He/she does not know what will happen next, who will care for him/her or if the remaining parent will also leave.

When a child loses a parent through death, the initial loss is overwhelming and frightening. The finality is difficult to bear. When parents divorce, children may be subjected to ongoing conflict; they travel back and forth from Mom's to Dad's and back to Mom's again. Because divorce does not seem as final as death, they cling to the dream that their parents will resolve their differences and remarry each other.

Children need sufficient time to mourn their profound loss if they are to emotionally survive death or divorce in the family. Young children often do not even possess the vocabulary

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to express the intense hurt they are undergoing. They need to have caring adults to help and guide them when they experience the wide range of distressing emotions associated with grief and begin the healing process toward acceptance.

Single-parent children can grow into happy, healthy, responsible adults. But tremendous care, understanding, emotional support and love must be present for them to weather this storm. Ideally, their parents should be the people providing this support. However, this rarely happens because their parents are in the midst of their grief too.

Caring, nurturing adults -- including teachers -- can fill this need by being available for the child, talking with the child and listening to the child. It is imperative that children talk about what has happened, and more especially, how they feel about it. Otherwise, their anger and sadness will simmer and then one day erupt. Young children may become disruptive in the classroom or on the playground; adolescents may become aggressive or turn to alcohol, drugs, violence or other self-destructive behavior.

Single-parent children have discovered early in life the pain of losing a loved one. They may, however, learn that hope, compassion, inner-strength, and, yes, even a rainbow, may come from their pain.

The Emotional Impact of Loss

Parental death or divorce can have serious emotional consequences for children.

Tragically, when a marriage is in the process of being dissolved or a parent is seriously ill, children are almost forgotten in many ways: sometimes they are physically neglected; meals are not prepared; laundry is left undone; the home is unkempt; or the child is left unattended for long

periods of time. Sometimes children are emotionally neglected as well -- reprimanded inappropriately, disciplined irrationally or ignored by a quiet, sullen and preoccupied parent. As the family unravels, the child's identity becomes distorted and blurred.

Hoping to protect their children from painful events, parents often do not tell children what is happening in the family. But children have ears that overhear what parents say and eyes that see their parents faces and gestures. Children are innocently perceptive and keenly aware of tension, sadness and anger. Knowing that something horrible is taking place while no one will discuss it is frightening. When this occurs, children attempt to make sense out of what is happening. They create their own fantasies, which are often more frightening than the truth.

Children often feel they are somehow responsible for the death or divorce that has occurred. They feel and believe that if they had behaved differently, received better grades in school, not quarreled with their brother or sister or done their chores more readily, Mom and Dad would not have divorced or their parent would not have died. Feeling responsible for such a family tragedy is a difficult burden to carry and it chips away at a child's self esteem.

In the misguided notion that they will soften the blow, parents may knowingly mislead their children. "No, Mom and Dad aren't getting a divorce," children are repeatedly told, despite the constant fights and arguments. Or they are assured that the seriously ill parent isn't going to die. When reality strikes, children feel that the two people they believed in the most have lied. As a result, the children see themselves as not trustworthy. If carried into adult life, this lack of self-trust can negatively affect their commitments, careers and relationships.

After divorce, children often feel torn. They want to be together with both parents and this is impossible. They may be subjected to negative comments about the former spouse from one or

both parents. Many times, children are told different sides of the same story by the parents or even the grandparents. For children, it is like living on a merry-go-round -- up and down, around and around, with no attendant in sight to stop the spinning.

Divorce, Death and Grief

Grief is a normal human reaction to any important loss: moving from a neighborhood or a school, losing a job, a brother or sister leaving for college or getting married, a pet dying, parents divorcing, or a parent, friend or relative dying. Children who experience death or divorce in their family need to grieve this loss appropriately. If they turn from the grief or attempt to bury it within, it becomes what is called "unresolved" grief and can have a destructive effect in their adulthood.

Grief has five stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. Understanding these stages helps in appreciating how children react to loss.

Denial -- a period of rejecting or not believing what is taking place. It is often characterized by a sense of emotional numbness or shock. "This can't be happening to me."

Anger -- characterized by a deep-seated rage that is displaced in all directions and projected at random. "Why me?" Anger may be directed at the parent or parents, doctors or hospitals, friends, teachers, family, God or self. It is essential to experience and express anger but to do so in appropriate ways.

Bargaining -- an attempt to exchange something we are willing to do or give up, for something we want to keep. It is an attempt to postpone or to reverse the inevitable. It is also a time when the grieving child experiences unrealistic guilt. "If only..." or "What if?..."

Depression -- occurs when the reality of the loss sets in. The grieving child can't cope; his/her life is out of control. He/she feels overwhelmed and experiences widely vacillating mood swings. Youth may turn to drugs, alcohol -- even become suicidal -- during this period. "What's the use?" they ask.

Acceptance -- children learn to live with the changes that have taken place. It is a time when the grieving child no longer dwells on the past but begins to look forward to tomorrow.

Children must pass through each of the five stages of grief before they heal and go on with their lives. This is a time of pain, anger, sadness, bitterness and tears. Going through the first four stages and reaching acceptance is a jagged journey. It isn't timed or smooth, orderly or predictable. Children may go back and forth, in and out of these stages, but, eventually, they arrive at acceptance and stay there.

One of the best ways for children to work through grief is to share their story, what exactly happened -- events, circumstances and feelings -- with someone they care about and can trust. The role of nonjudgmental listener can be a critical role for the teacher to assume.

Outward Signs of Grief in a Classroom Setting

A teacher friend once told me that she could predict a year ahead of time when a student's parents were getting a divorce. Her divination, she said, had nothing to do with possessing extrasensory skills. It was based solely on changes in the student's behavior.

Children's emotional reactions to loss are complex and varied. Age is a critical factor in determining how a child responds to either death or divorce. (See accompanying sidebars.)

Moderate behavioral changes reflect a child's internal emotional turmoil and are a *normal*

response to loss. But that doesn't mean these actions should be ignored or allowed to continue indefinitely. Children who exhibit these changes need special attention and care. Here are some in-class symptoms to watch for:

** Fidgeting; biting fingernails; outbursts during a class

** Staring out the window; daydreaming

** Homework incomplete; tests unfinished; locker/desk a mess

** Grades decline

** Drop out of school activities/events

** High absenteeism; call home often

** Homework, gym clothes, papers, lunch forgotten at someone's home

** Shoes, socks, clothes unmatched

Long-lasting radical shifts in behavior are not part of the normal grieving process. An outgoing child withdraws completely. An obedient student suddenly rebels against all class and school rules. Extreme changes in behavior usually are a sign that a student is in serious emotional trouble and needs professional counseling and guidance.

Easing the Burden of Grief for Single-Parent Children

Single-parent children often feel stigmatized and singled out for being different. Some classroom traditions and long-used terminology underscore their status as a child who no longer has two parents living together at home. The following suggestions are simple steps teachers can take to help ease the single-child's emotional burden and make him or her feel more comfortable and more accepted in school.

1. Identify the single-parent children -- but do so in a quiet, private manner. It is important for legal and emotional reasons that the school is aware of each student's family unit.

*Update emergency records annually requesting current information, ie:

Mother's Name		Father's Name	
Address		Address	
Phone #	Work #	Phone #	Work #

2. Be aware of your own attitude and feelings -- children are acutely perceptive and sensitive, especially at this time in their lives.

* Avoid negative biases or judgments and terms such as "broken home"

3. Teach feeling words in the classroom -- it helps the children describe their own feelings and is of benefit to all children.

4. Initiate class discussion -- this allows children to understand how others feel about death or divorce in the family. It also helps children to learn compassion.

* Discuss various meanings of family: newlyweds, empty-nesters, nuclear families, single-parent and step-families.

5. Be aware of gift giving and gift making -- the child should be allowed to decide for whom the gift is intended. You could say that the gift is for an important adult in their life. Avoid Mother's Day gifts for Mother only, etc.

6. Be sensitive to school events -- avoid Mother/Son dances; Father/Daughter outings, etc. Children without that particular parent present in their lives feel the loss acutely at this time. It is easy enough to have Parent/Child events.

7. Stay out of custody battles -- unless you do have something significant to contribute, it is not your place and there is no need to be intimidated.

8. Schedule parent-teacher conferences at various times -- this allows the working parent to attend.

* Be careful not to remind the children of the conference by saying "be sure to bring 'both' of your parents tonight"; if one is not currently available or the parents are hostile to each other, the child will remain silent about the conference altogether.

9. Do have books available in the library -- if children are apprehensive about talking to anyone, often they will feel less threatened by reading about divorce or death. At least, they will have the opportunity to realize they are not alone in their feelings.

10. Be supportive of the parent's situation -- encouragement, understanding and affirmation are most needed at this time.

* Have books available for the parent to read.
* Have a list of community social service agencies and support systems.

11. Don't blame all problems on living in a single-parent family -- the crisis time is normally 18 months.

12. Be sensitive in the communications and letters going home.

* Avoid "Dear Parents" -- Dear Parent/Guardian is appropriate.
* Never assume the last names are the same.
* Never assume that there are a Mr. and Mrs. at home because no one has informed you otherwise.

13. Understand the financial difficulties -- by working together on the finances, a mutually agreeable payment schedule for tuition and other fees should be worked out.

14. Keep communication open between you and the parent.

* If you notice academic or behavioral changes, keep a record.
* Send progress reports when necessary, along with notes of praise.
* Use the child's progress as a vehicle to open dialogue.

15. Provide opportunities to talk with the child alone -- the child needs desperately a significant adult to listen to him.

* Affirm the child's statements
* Be empathetic
* Be understanding

* Assist the child in verbalizing by using feeling words

* Continually remind the child that you care and if he wants ever to talk, you will be there to listen.

16. Don't make light of the situation -- validate the child's feelings.

* Avoid statements like: "It isn't that bad"; "It will get better"; or "Time heals all wounds". The child is living in the present and needs to know how to cope today!

17. Don't pry or intrude into family privacy -- there is a difference between asking the child how he is doing and what is going on in the family, or with particular members of that family.

18. Don't give advice or suggestions -- usually there isn't any to give; the child just needs you to listen.

19. Don't bring up sensitive issues -- with the child in front of peers or other adults.

20. Be careful not to compromise the child's confidentiality -- at this time it may be difficult for the child to trust adults again.

A Helping Hand for Grieving Children

The observations and information presented here are based on more than 13 years experience of working with and helping grieving children through RAINBOWS. I founded the

organization following my divorce when I could locate no resources for my three young sons. Today, RAINBOWS is the nation's largest not-for-profit grief support organization dedicated solely to helping children and adolescents cope with the emotional pain of loss. We have more than 6,500 sites in 48 states and 13 foreign countries and have served more than 600,000 youth. Most sites are school-based.

RAINBOWS offers two age-directed curricula for youth: Rainbows (elementary age edition) and Spectrum (adolescent edition). Both curricula are endorsed by Big Brothers/Big Sisters, the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts, the Chicago Bar Association, Parents Without Partners, Stepfamily Association of America and Hospice. A new curriculum for pre-school children (SunBeams) is being developed.

RAINBOWS provides an opportunity for those who are grieving to share their feelings in an accepting environment supported by trained, caring, compassionate adult volunteers. Our goal is to furnish the participants with an understanding of their new family unit; to assist in building a stronger sense of self-esteem; and to direct them toward a healthy resolution of the changes that have taken place in their personal lives.

A preliminary study by Loyola University Chicago found that among youth experiencing loss, RAINBOWS improved self esteem, generated stability and boosted school performance. "The RAINBOWS program is successfully meeting a growing need in today's society," said principal investigator Dr. Jack Kavanagh, Professor of Curriculum and Human Resource Development.

In an ongoing step to further enhance program effectiveness, researchers at the University of Illinois are measuring the impact of RAINBOWS programs among 300 elementary-school

students who have experienced parental loss through divorce or death to determine the extent to which providing social support, instruction and practice combined with strategies designed to reframe children's understanding of divorce and death facilitates their adjustment to these critical life transitions.

Even among youth, the pain of loss cannot be avoided. The challenge for all of us who work with children and teens is to show them that *it doesn't need to hurt forever.*

For information, write RAINBOWS 1111 Tower Road, Schaumburg IL 60173 or call 1-800-266-3206. Look for RAINBOWS on the Internet at http://www.RAINBOWS.ORG

Sidebar One

Age Level Reactions to Death
Among School-Age Children

3 -- 6 Years Old

1. Child needs care and protection. The presence of a nurturing adult he/she knows.

2. Child cannot comprehend space or time. Consequently, the term "final" is meaningless. Death is understood to be temporary.

3. Child may act out feelings or act as if nothing has changed.

4. Home and family are very important. Child realizes that he/she is missing something/someone other children have.

5. Some common grieving behavior indicators are: sleeplessness, regressive behavior, refusal to speak, increased physical aggression such as hitting or kicking, destruction of work done by other children, bullying and increased restless behavior, disorganization, insatiable demands for affection and approval.

6. This is an age of fantasies where child believes in the magical power of his/her own thoughts.

   a. Child thinks his/her wishes are responsible for the death of the parent.
   b. Child fears his/her own imagined powers. (If one parent has died, the other might also die.)

7 -- 10 Years Old

1. Child thinks of death as a person (ghost) to be outsmarted.

2. Child views death as a punishment inflicted because he/she was naughty.

3. Child can become preoccupied with death.

4. Sadness is a prominent feeling.

5. Child may become angry at parent who died then experiences guilt because of angry feelings.

6. Because of altered family situation, child fears for the future.

7. Child displays inconsistent behavior at home and school. Grades may decline.

8. Child is self conscious about his/her family being different.

11-18 Years Old

1. Child may be lonely and unable to cope with this unfamiliar feeling.

2. Grades may decline; absences and tardiness increase. Grieving children may have more colds, stomach aches. Often feel apathetic.

3. He/she begins to understand the concept of death and even to ponder the concept of an afterlife.

4. They begin to believe that death is irreversible.

5. Teens may be cast in role of "good friend" or "date" for surviving parent.

6. Many teens have additional responsibilities at home.

7. They are often torn between feeling old enough to handle the situation and still feeling frightened and in need of support systems.

Sidebar Two

Age Level Reactions to Divorce
Among School-Age Children

3 - 6 Years Old

1. Home and family are very important. He/she realizes at this age that he/she is missing something other children have.

2. If parents are emotionally and physically inaccessible, the child may not even be able to master his anxiety through play.

3. Some common grieving behavior indicators are: sleeplessness, regressive behavior, refusal to speak, increased physical aggression such as hitting or kicking, destruction of work done by other children, bullying and increased restless behavior, disorganization, insatiable demands for affection and approval.

4. This is an age of fantasies where child believes in the magical power of his/her own thoughts.

   a. Child thinks his/her wishes are responsible for the loss of the parent through divorce.
   b. He/she fears his/her own imagined powers. (If one parent has left, the other might do the same.)
   c. Child fantasies that non-residential parent will return.

7 -- 10 Years Old

1. Sadness is a prominent feeling. Child cries often or attempts to hold in feelings.

2. Because of unstable family situation, child fears for the future.
    a. Child feels there may be no place for him/her to take refuge.
    b. Child fears antagonizing one of their parents.

3. Child may try to cope with these fears by developing insatiable hunger. He/she may also fantasize about fancier bicycles, clothes or elaborate vacations.

4. Child may be preoccupied with reconciliation fantasies.

5. Child experiences conflict in loyalties to parents.

6. Child may display inconsistent behavior at home and school. Grades may decline.

7. Child is self conscious about his/her family life being different.

11 -- 14 Years Old

1. The predominant reaction at this age is anger.
    a. Anger may be a cover-up for intense pain.
    b. Anger is well-organized and object-directed at mother, father or both.
    c. For some children, anger is linked to immoral or irresponsible behavior.

2. Pre-teen feels shame because of the divorce.

3. He/she fears being abandoned or forgotten.

4. They worry about custody and visiting issues; the emotional and physical well-being of both parents; and family finances.

5. They experience intense loyalty conflicts.

6. They may be lonely and unable to cope with this unfamiliar feeling.

7. He/she tries to bury/hide intense pain under layers of denial, anger, incoherence, avoidance and constant motion.

8. They immerse themselves in activities which generate peer approval and success.

9. Shifts in family structure threaten pre-teen's self identity.

10. Grades may decline; absences and tardiness increase. They have more colds, stomach aches. Often feel apathetic.

15 -- 18 Years Old

1. Teens are sensitive to emotional tension in the family.

2. Their moods change quickly. They often overreact to situations.

3. They may compensate for feelings of loss with a need for better "things."

4. Teens worry that parents will become ill, lose their jobs; they worry about being different from others, being laughed at, being lonely, unpopular. They are concerned with their parents' wellbeing and custody and visitation issues.

5. Teen may be cast in role of "good friend" or "date" for parent.

6. Many teens have additional responsibilities at home.

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